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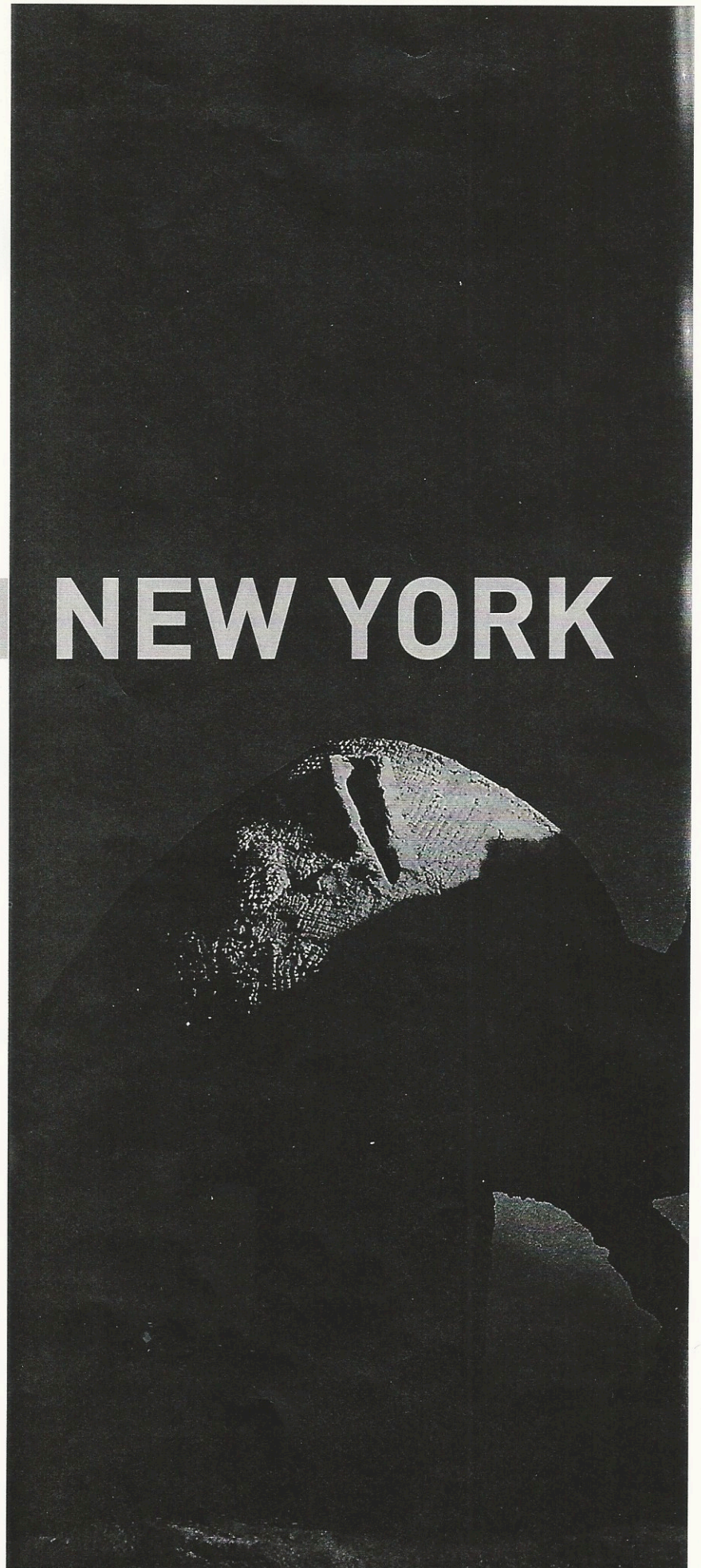


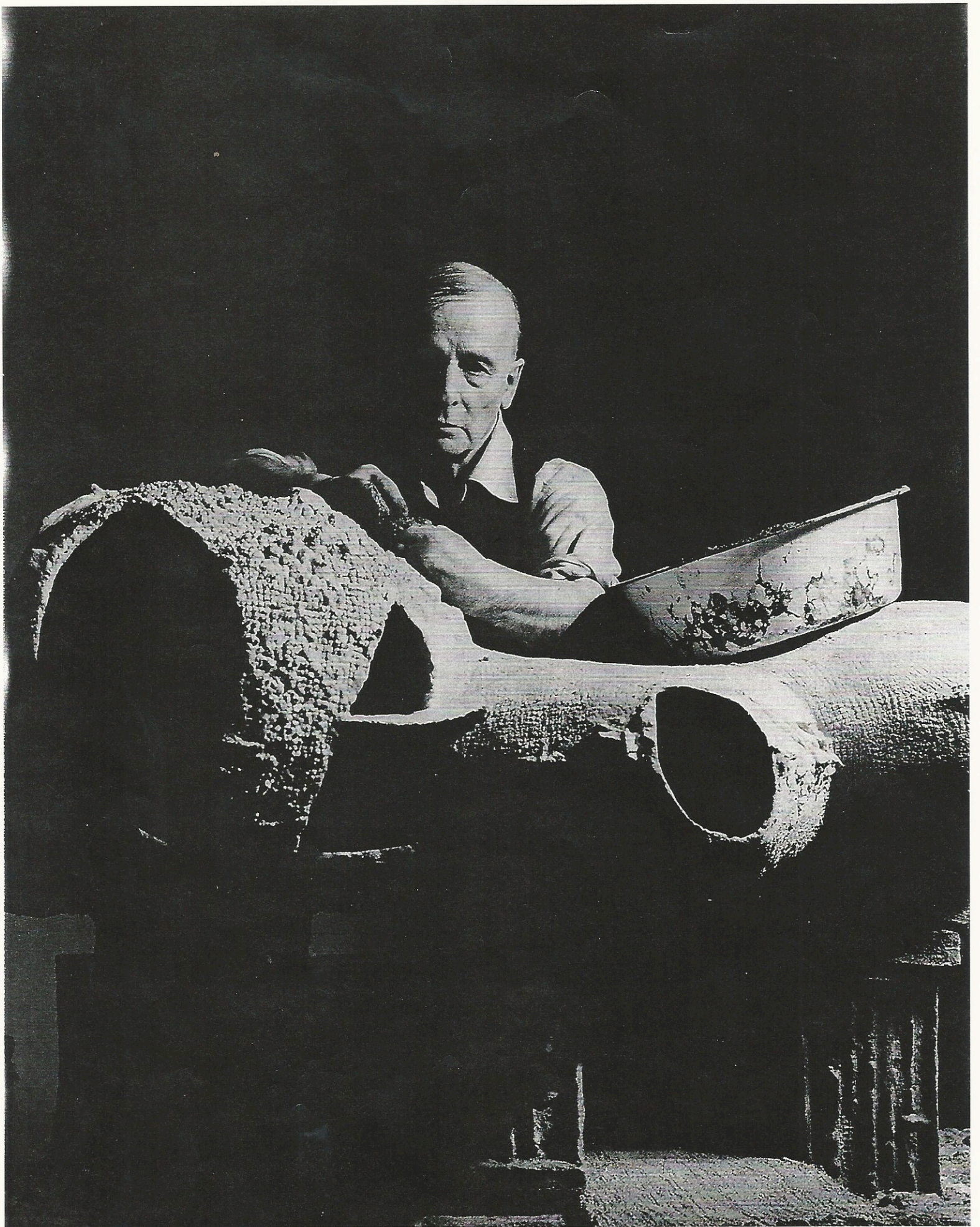
APRIL IN NEW YORK

written by **Paul Laffoley**

It was a bright and balmy April day in Hunt Hall at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, circa 1962, and I was nearing the end of my second year of studying architecture. A jury was in secession: A factory for light industry in a suburban setting was the assignment, typical of the early 1960s. I was up next and quite apprehensive, and not because of the way I'd developed the appearance of my factory. I was excellent at presentations: Students from upper years would often attend my juries to see how I would merge a sculptor's sensibility with a functional program, and that day was no exception. As I moved through the crowd nearer to my ink drawings and model, my anxiety rose to such a pitch that I began to recall T.S. Eliot's famous but pretentious mystical clichés such as: "Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth" from *Animula*.

My apprehension was due to the fact that at the same time in another part of the school another jury was empanelled—"a grand jury"—and I was the subject. A grand jury at an architectural school consists of having most of your finished work delivered to a special room which any faculty member who is so inclined enters accompanied by the dean. The door is then shut and locked from the inside. Your professional destiny is sealed. If you are acquitted, past sins are forgiven, you go on to pass and are forgotten with the rest of the mild-mannered architects who live a life of relative ease and fashion. If, instead, you are "kicked for a field goal," you'd better reread your battered copy of *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand for hints of what to do next.





Pats of encouragement propelled me onward, reassuring me for the moment. Suddenly I felt a ham-fisted grip on my elbow, in that special place that inflicts the most pain with the least effort. The hand of fate had me once again within its grasp, this time in the form of the school's rising star engineer. His nickname, "The Concentrated Load," described someone over six-feet tall, weighing over 350 pounds, with no neck and a head that resembled a blond, crewcut bowling ball. He had been present when my first-year design teachers expressed doubts that I should be allowed to proceed to my second year, reasoning that I had become "overly involved" in my work. I inquired if there was a definition of "a safe involvement level of study," perhaps akin to the so-called "safe-suds level" one associates with washing machines. No response was forthcoming, only knowing glances that seemed to say, "We've finally got him." The "Concentrated Load" just sat there, unblinking, his ball-bearing eyes staring through me like a sphinx. Their message was clear: "You're history—not today, but soon."

After that I was graded with diphthongs instead of the usual single letters. A typical grade for me became "AE"—"A" for the concept and "E" for engineering. Their position was that if constructed, my designs would simply fall down. The moment of reckoning had arrived. But the engineer said in a hushed tone: "You had better go to the office before you start talking." As I walked down the corridors toward administration in Robinson Hall, I recalled another T.S. Eliot quote from *The Wasteland*: "April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land."

The same secretary that first welcomed me to the Architectural School of Design handed me a letter that contained a single sentence: "You seem more interested in art than architecture, best of luck in the future." The significance of what José Luis Sert—dean of the school and Walter Gropius' successor at Harvard—had once said came crashing back, "I had to give up art for architecture." Returning to Hunt Hall to retrieve my work, I could not locate my presentation boards and model. Faculty members and students alike returned only blank stares: I had become anathema. A friend, Max, led me to a side room where I found my boards and model turned to the wall. Max was on the verge of suffering the same fate as I, but he encouraged me to go to New York and become a sculptor in the meantime, insisting that my day as an architect would surely come.

My parents, however, were not so sanguine. In fact, they were beside themselves. My father had warned me against going to the GSD because he no longer had any friends at the school. He'd taught at the Harvard Business School for a spell, but his only architect friend left from that era was Marcel Breuer, who had left his teaching post at the school in 1947 to open an office in New York City. By this time both my father and Breuer were way out of the academic loop.

My last and only resort seemed to be my Uncle John. He was an architect with a lucrative practice in Cape Cod and the adjacent islands designing individual houses at $3/4$ to $2/3$ their normal scale. This was years before Phillip Johnson ever dreamed of constructing his "Follee," a six-foot high gazebo on the grounds of his New Canaan, Connecticut, estate. When pictures of the Follee appeared in magazines in 1962, my uncle accused Johnson of stealing his ideas, despite the fact that he'd probably never heard of my uncle. Uncle John's clients were the "wash-a-shores," a term that generationally ensconced residents of the Cape

used to describe the wealthy interlopers who moved in for the instant pedigree its real-estate conferred. My uncle had been born in his grandmother's house on Nantucket, so he knew whereof he spoke, but the wash-a-shores were his bread-and-butter, ladies of an indeterminate age who dragged their husbands around like pets on a leash.

My uncle's modus operandi was to buy a small plot of land, tear down any existing structure, then design and have built one of his "Cape Cod Corkers," as he called them. He would load the tiny rooms with local yard-sale junk furniture, sprinkle in some real antiques, then put up the For Sale sign and wait for the inevitable phone call expressing a desire to purchase what was described as "the most adorable little house I've ever seen!" The fact that after six months or so the occupants would find living there so intolerable that they'd be willing to sell back their "tinny, tiny turkeys" to my uncle at a loss never seemed to trouble him a bit. To him the mission of an architect was not to serve the clients' needs, but rather to protect his homeland against invaders. He was as xenophobic about Cape Cod as Virginia Woolf was about England.

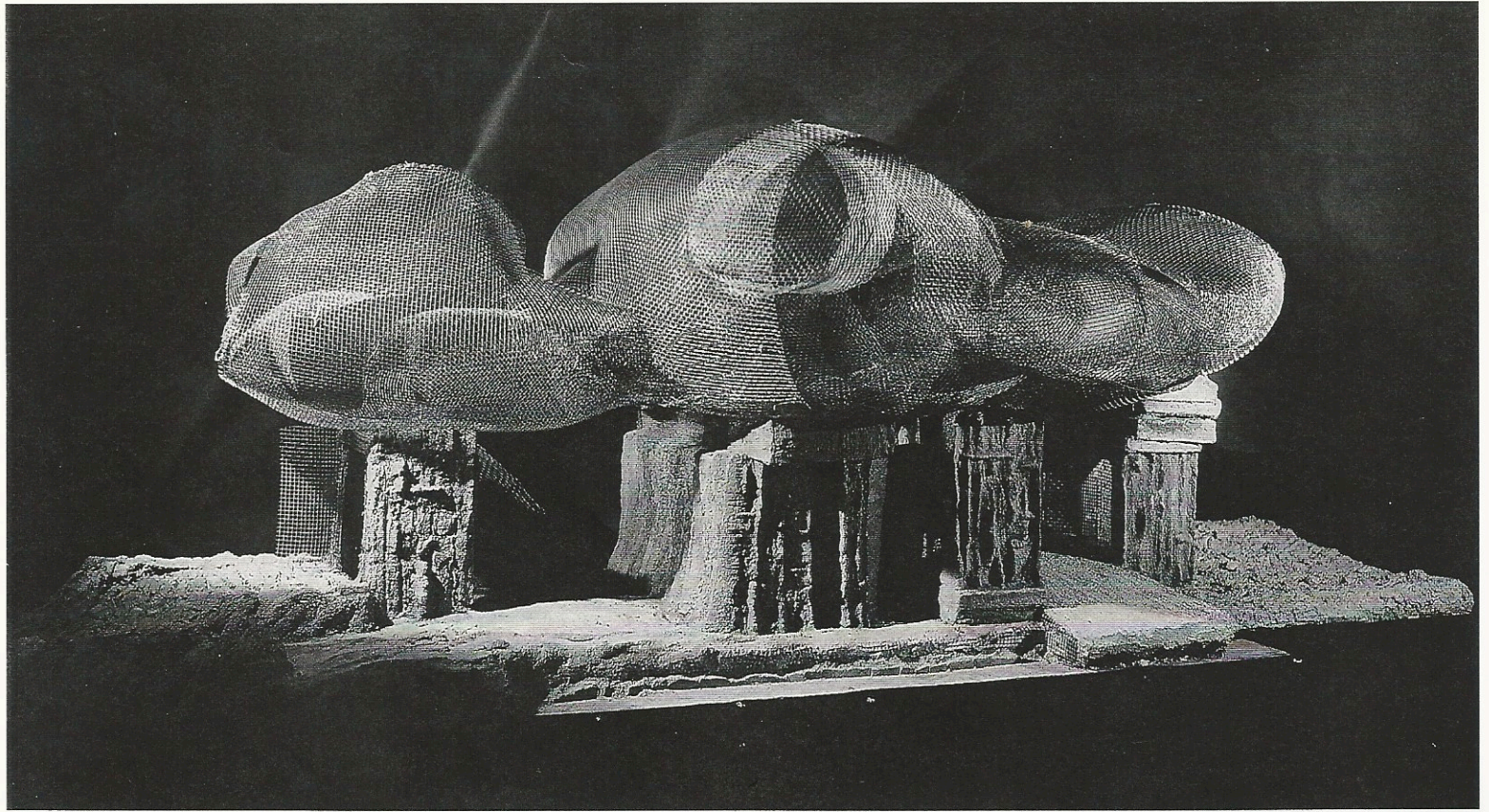
But architecture as social weaponry was not my uncle's only diversion. In a methodical and informed manner, he made it a point to attend any lecture given by an architect in Boston and the surrounding New England environs to ferret out any international or cosmic intentions in their "pitches." His copious notes were later developed into lengthy diatribes sent to the Boston Society of Architects explaining in complete detail how these "amateurs" and "dilettante designers" were ruining the profession. My uncle continued in this way until one day he received a reply from the Society requesting him to cease and desist. Apparently his writings so amused the personnel that their work habits were being interrupted. I never took such a condescending attitude: To me, he was a fountain of knowledge about contemporary architecture as long as I ignored his attitudes. They say that there is a point where insanity and authentic genius meet. In like manner, I believe, there is another equally mythic point where the narrow and the broad mind can merge. Realizing this about him I came to know that whenever we met I would be in the presence of absolute inverse knowledge. While my childhood friends were concerned only with the latest movies or baseball statistics I was being indoctrinated in the horrors wrought on the world by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier.

A week after I was kicked out of school I went to see my uncle, prepared to be dazzled by a new revelation. I was not disappointed. "You can't work here," were the first words out of his mouth. He had heard through the family grapevine what had happened to me. I explained that I had not come for a job but for advice on my future. Such a statement would usually evoke a torrent of platitudes, but that day he seemed preoccupied with writing another letter. He gave a few simple suggestions with a wave of his hand that silently inferred "Don't bother me." The "suggestions" were that I should either "grow a beard" or "get married." Since I had no intention of doing either one I was ahead of the game, but I sensed something big was going on in his head.

"Uncle John, who are you writing to?" I asked.

"Philip Johnson," he replied brusquely.

"Is that the architect who is in partnership with Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe and who has his office in New York City on Park Avenue in the Seagram Building?"



“Yes,” he said, and continued writing.

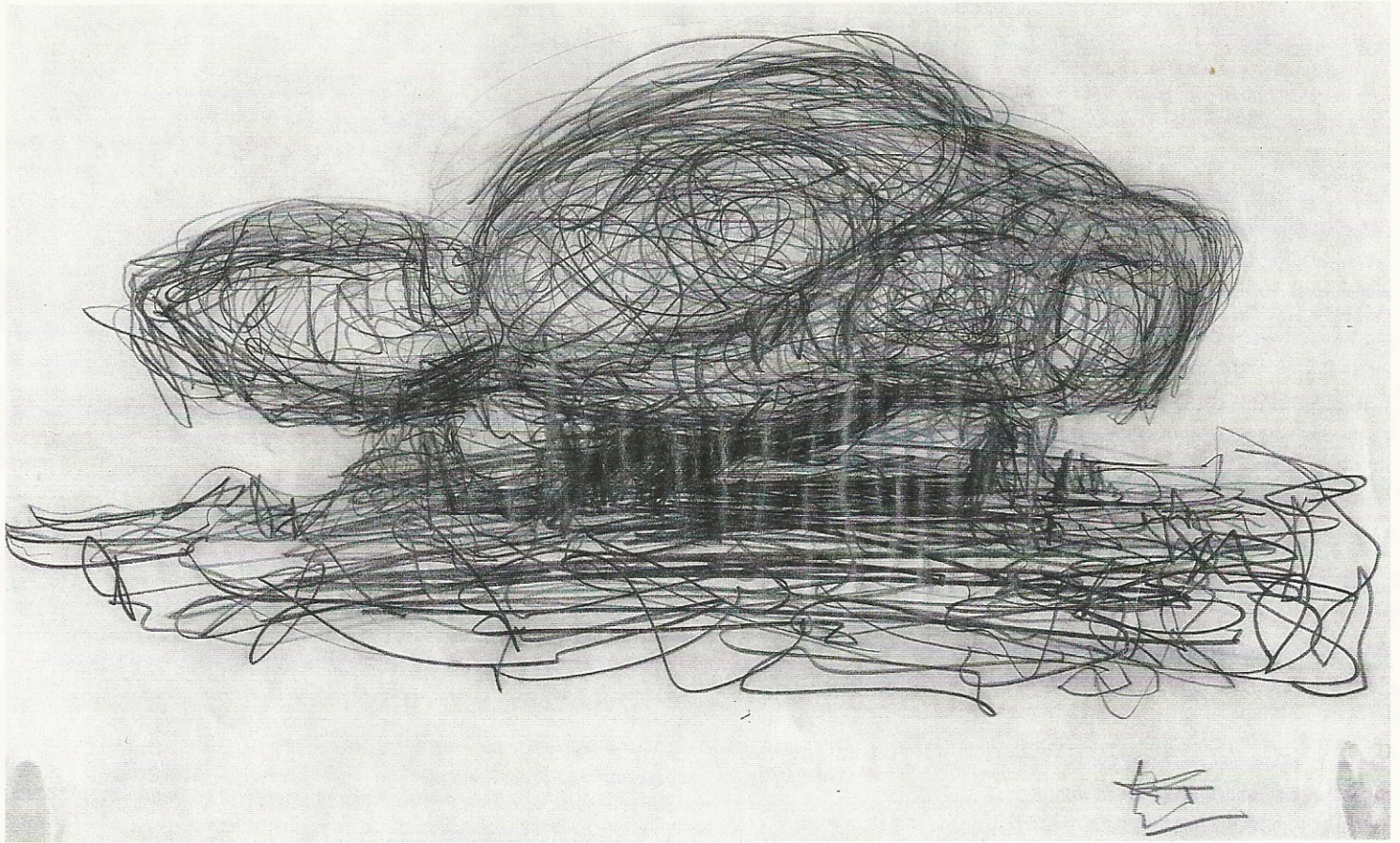
The conversation reminded me of a family trip to Manhattan in 1958. I was ordered by my father to find a suitable restaurant for a leisurely afternoon snack. My mother didn't want to go to the Russian Tea Room again and said she'd prefer to avoid the Divan de Parisienne because I had thrown up there as a child and they might remember. We were staying at the Waldorf-Astoria, so I walked two blocks uptown to see the finished Seagram Building that I had been studying in William H. Jordy's American Architecture class at Brown University. Circling the plaza I noticed a sign reading “The Four Seasons.” Locating its entrance I was confronted by a pompous young man in a pink blazer who asked, “What do you want?” From years of experience with my uncle I knew the value of blunt, no-nonsense conversation. “I am hungry,” I replied. “Is this a place where I can eat now?”

His expression suggested that he had just encountered a space-alien who had somehow managed to drive a corkscrew up his rectum. “Yes,” he said faintly, “but you must make reservations.” I did, and within the hour we were enjoying “afternoon tea,” the price of which exceeded \$200. My father was fit to be tied. While considering how to appease him, I heard a voice at an adjacent table that sounded like boulders striking each other. A quick glance to the left revealed Mies Van Der Rohe and Philip Johnson in conversation. Quick as sin I grabbed some matchbooks, went over, and asked for their autographs. I also inquired if they ate there often. Answering for both as they signed, Johnson said: “Since we designed this place and it just opened, we thought to try it, but if this is going to happen all the time we may reconsider.” Mumbling an embarrassed “Thank you,” I hurried after my parents who had paid the bill and were making a swift exit.

This flashback in my uncle's office made me wonder if I had been spending too much time in his presence, picking up his cultivated rudeness. Still, I persevered. “What are writing to Philip Johnson about?” I asked. “About this!” he bellowed in his nastiest voice, flinging a recent copy of *Progressive Architecture* at me. Astonished at this uncharacteristic violence, I realized that I'd hit pay dirt at last. Picking up the disheveled magazine, I looked at its cover and browsed the accompanying article. It was about an architect-artist named Frederick Kiesler. Stunned, I felt myself in the presence of something authentically new and began to wonder why I hadn't heard of Kiesler before.

Years later I ran into one of my teachers from Harvard who asked how I was getting on. During our conversation I mentioned studying with Kiesler. His response was, “I hope you didn't pay attention to that nut! I brought him in for one of our Tuesday night lectures in 1960. He was included that year, along with Bruno Taut, Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, and Le Corbusier in an exhibition, ‘Visionary Architecture,’ at The Museum of Modern Art that was cooked up by Philip Johnson. Kiesler came onstage at Hunt Hall and began to show slides and explain his work. At first there was a respectful quiet when his set designs were presented, but when the images of his ‘Endless House’—exterior and interior—were on the screen, noises from the audience began. They rose to a crescendo of boos when he told the students to give up the right angle in design—no columns—and have all the walls, ceilings, and floors flow together like the living curves of a woman.

“The overheard remarks became unbelievably rude,” he continued. “The milder ones were like ‘Go back to the womb—you're small enough,’ or ‘potato eater’ and ‘artichoke peddler.’ They drowned me out also, because I was the one who introduced him. He was literally driven off the



stage, and my attempts to apologize to him were met with silence. But in the long run his historical legacy will pale in comparison with those of Corbu, or Wright, so it really doesn't matter," he said. I countered that Kiesler had started teaching at Columbia University in 1937, had lectured at Yale on a regular basis, and Harvard before that, and had been invited in 1957 to participate in a discussion on museum architecture at the Fogg with Philip Johnson, Jose Luis Sert, Louis Kahn and Walter Gropius. "It doesn't matter," he returned. "It was his 'Endless House' that the students and most architects objected to." Suddenly I felt vindicated because this was the same teacher who had declared me "over-involved in my studies."

My uncle was no less vituperative toward Kiesler. Though he wouldn't admit it, I suspect he was in the audience that night egging the students on. "Will you read me the letter you've just written to Johnson?" I asked. "Happily," he replied. The body of the letter was a fully documented rant on why Kiesler's ideas, if unleashed, could bring down the entire history of Western civilization. The message to Johnson was:

"Mr. Johnson, since you, a man of considerable reputation in architecture, have for reasons I can not fathom, nor will I challenge herein at this time, seen fit to praise and publicly encourage the 'architect (?)' Frederick Kiesler, will you now take an equally public stand and condemn this man for the sake of the architectural profession in particular and humanity in general?"

"Yours most sincerely, John D., A.I.A."

My uncle never wrote out his last name beyond the initial, his position being that he was so well known that he didn't have to, and if there were occasionally people who were unaware of him, that was their tough luck. Of course Johnson never acknowledged the letter, for obvious reasons, and continued his praise for Kiesler. I was fortunate to witness what may be the ultimate personal tribute to his memory, in 1996, on the occasion of Johnson's 90th birthday celebration at Columbia University. Johnson rose before the assembled architects to declare that Kiesler, whom over the years he had called the "greatest unbuilt" architect of the 20th century, produced thinking and visual forms which soon would enter the general practice of architecture. His remarks were actually briefer than my description. Johnson stood up, said "Kiesler is next," and sat down—this to an audience already stunned by the energy of a man entering his tenth decade.

On my way out of my uncle's office, he yelled after me, "If you really want advice, never have anything to do with Frederick Kiesler!" Naturally, by the next day, I was hot on Kiesler's trail. I knew he lived in New York City, so I located a Manhattan telephone directory and prayed he was listed. He was, at 56 Seventh Avenue, between 14th and 15th Street, just above Greenwich Village. From my home in Belmont, Massachusetts, I launched a letter-writing campaign. Cold-calling might be fatal, because if you catch him in bad mood or at dinner, you're dead; whereas in a letter you can explain your case and have it read at the recipient's convenience. Also, if you continue to write, that shows true

interest and dedication, while a barrage of phone calls could likely be interpreted as stalking. I instinctively knew I would have to write many letters to kindle the attention of a man like Kiesler; I just never realized how many. Each time I began with the same plea—to be taken on as one of his apprentices because of my admiration for his work. With each succeeding letter I added more information about myself combined with artistic and architectural ideas that I was thinking of at the moment.

By the twelfth letter my expectation of a reply began to dwindle, but I persevered nonetheless. After the sixteenth effort my father suggested that my letters were being used to light cigarettes. That piece of cynicism almost caused me to throw in the towel, but I tried one more time, expecting nothing. This time I was gloriously wrong. Kiesler's letter was brief and to the point: I was to meet him at his apartment at 2:30 in the afternoon on April 27. I packed two suitcases—one with clothes, the other with a series of drawings I was doing under the direction of Mirko Basaldella, then sculptor-in-residence at the Carpenter Center at Harvard. I also packed my model of the factory I had just designed with the base cut down to fit inside the suitcase.

Taking the train into the city, I tried to rehearse what I would say to Kiesler, but instead fell into a troubled sleep. At five in the afternoon the train pulled into Penn Station. By six I was ensconced in a small room at Sloan House, a branch of the YMCA on 34TH Street. At seven I was out wandering Times Square. Unable to compose myself, I went into a science fiction movie on 42ND Street. The admission was only 45 cents, so I attended several different theaters and saw eight films before they all closed at 4 A.M. I sat in the front row in each theater. In some locations the armrests were missing so I was able to take a nap. Awakened by an usher promptly at 4 A.M. I was informed that I had slept through the first showing of *Mothra*, one of the finest science-fiction movies to come out of Japan that year. Later I made up for that by seeing it 18 more times, once with Andy Warhol. Walking swiftly back down the eight blocks through the garment district to 34TH Street, I turned right and was soon asleep in a real bed at the YMCA.

Waking at noon I hurried to get ready for my 2:30 appointment with Kiesler, thinking I might be late. I took the 8TH Avenue subway 20 blocks downtown to 14TH Street, walked one block over to 7TH Avenue and into the entryway of a nondescript cream colored Art Deco building. Looking for his name I pressed the push button. The buzzer let me in. The floors were not designated in the foyer for some reason, but they were in the elevator. On the ride up holding the suitcase that contained my artwork I only now dared to look at my watch. It was 2:27. I'd made it on time, but my heart was still pounding with anticipation. Knocking on his door, I heard no response. I knocked again, and suddenly the door swung open, revealing the smallest man I had ever seen. I guessed his height to be about 4'6". I'm no giant myself, 5'9 1/2", but I was a full head-and-a-half above him. He was not, however, a dwarf whose bodily proportions are abnormal, nor was he a midget. He was a perfectly formed, thin man in his early '70s with large, dark, penetrating eyes, combined with the energy and mobility of someone decades younger. I thought that in terms of size, he would fit comfortably into one of my uncle's scaled-down houses. He was clad only in his pajamas and a robe. Apparently the door buzzer had awakened him.

I started to introduce myself. "I'm..." But before I could say my name,

he blurted out in a thick German accent, "I know who you are, but you cannot stay here." Crestfallen, after all I had gone through to see him, I turned and started to leave, tears welling up in my eyes.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I thought you just told me to leave," I replied.

"That is not what I meant," he answered. "You come to my door with a suitcase in hand, all I can think is that you want to be taken in like some poor immigrant."

"No, I brought some stuff to show you," I explained.

"I hope it's not clothes," he countered.

"No, it's some drawings and a model," I stammered.

"Mein Gott! You are as literal as a child," he exclaimed. "Where is your sense of humor? Do you follow people about also?"

The blush of embarrassment that covered my face confirmed his suspicion.

"Well, show me what you have."

In order to do that I had to get down on my hands and knees. I had packed the suitcase in a special way. If not opened correctly my model would be damaged. This situation placed my head at a lower elevation in the room than his, thus allowing him a symbolic affirmation of his sense of artistic superiority over me, but his expression of benign condescension at my fumbblings changed rapidly into one of astonished admiration when he saw what I had to offer.

"Your work has a sense of being made with great love that is almost medieval. With whom did you study?" he asked.

"For the drawings I saw Mirko Basaldella for a while."

"He taught you well."

"What he asked me to do was to go away and do 300 drawings in ink about 20 by 30 inches, and not to come back until I'd finished them all. This was right after I told Mirko that his work reminded me of Picasso's sculptures. He then took me aside and showed a series of iron masks by Julio Gonzalez, the person who inspired Picasso to try sculpture, saying that he'd also met Gonzalez. Two months later when I came back to Mirko's studio, he picked out my best drawing." Then Kiesler asked who was responsible for the concept of my factory project. Again I said I alone, explaining that "by the end of my first year at GSD, other students began to copy me. After that I would work at home and bring in my pre-



sentations at the last minute. I think it was then that I was headed out of the school. They claimed I was consciously thwarting the process of the school which is to have everyone working together so that you learn from each other. Others were learning from me, but I learned nothing from them.”

“You had better get used to that,” he said. “It does not stop. In fact it only gets worse.”

Kiesler continued with a blustering tirade on intellectual theft and the way in which the thief, if he has garnered enough personal power, could actually alter the course of history by means of false documentation. His case in point was the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum in New York City. Kiesler claimed that he was to have designed the museum and not Frank Lloyd Wright. The story went something like this: It seems that Peggy Guggenheim—another scion of the Guggenheim family, and an avid supporter of Surrealism—asked Kiesler in 1942 to devise a new exhibition method for objects for her Art Of This Century gallery located behind Rockefeller Center at 30 West 50th Street. Kiesler’s design involved concave curved walls, a modular piece of furniture with many functions (seats, pedestals, tables, etc) and a system presenting paintings of different sizes so that each one could be seen correctly no matter where it was located in the space. What he did was to project and angle the paintings off the walls so they hung in space by means of ropes, straps or tapes and special wood brackets with swivels. The result was a perfect continuity of viewing of each piece. Other parts of the gallery had works shown in a more conventional manner, but throughout the walls and ceilings curved and undulated in response to Kiesler’s installation which opened as a success and did not close until five years later.

Peggy Guggenheim immediately became interested in having Kiesler design not just an installation and a gallery, but an entire museum in New York City. Because of the site that was proposed, and the inflated land values of the city, Kiesler saw a chance to utilize an idea he had worked on in 1925 while he was exhibiting his “City in Space” project at the Grand Palais in Paris. Josef Hoffmann, then director of the Austrian section of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes invited Kiesler to design and mount a theater display in a large rectangular space in the vast interior of the Grand Palais. The result was an environment in the De Stijl mode (he had been invited to join the De Stijl group two years prior as its youngest member) that resembled a fourth-dimensional bridge structure rendition of a Mondrian painting. It was hung from the ceiling in a completely black room with only accent lighting. To the audience the extremities of the project appeared to fade in outer space.

This fecund period in Kiesler’s life had produced several exercises in architectural continuity, one of which he now presented to Guggenheim—his “Tensionist” Skyscraper of 1925. It was a project for a department store in the form of a gigantic upended corkscrew with a central structure axis that held the elevator shaft and the heating and cooling systems. In essence, there was but one floor, spiraled downward from its height to the ground floor, extending the concept of the cantilever to its logical extreme. The exterior was to be sheathed in light-polarizing glass that would prevent glare and solar gain in the summer. From the underside of the ceiling surface he planned to hang an exhibit surface $\frac{2}{3}$ of the distance away from the core. At no point did this sur-

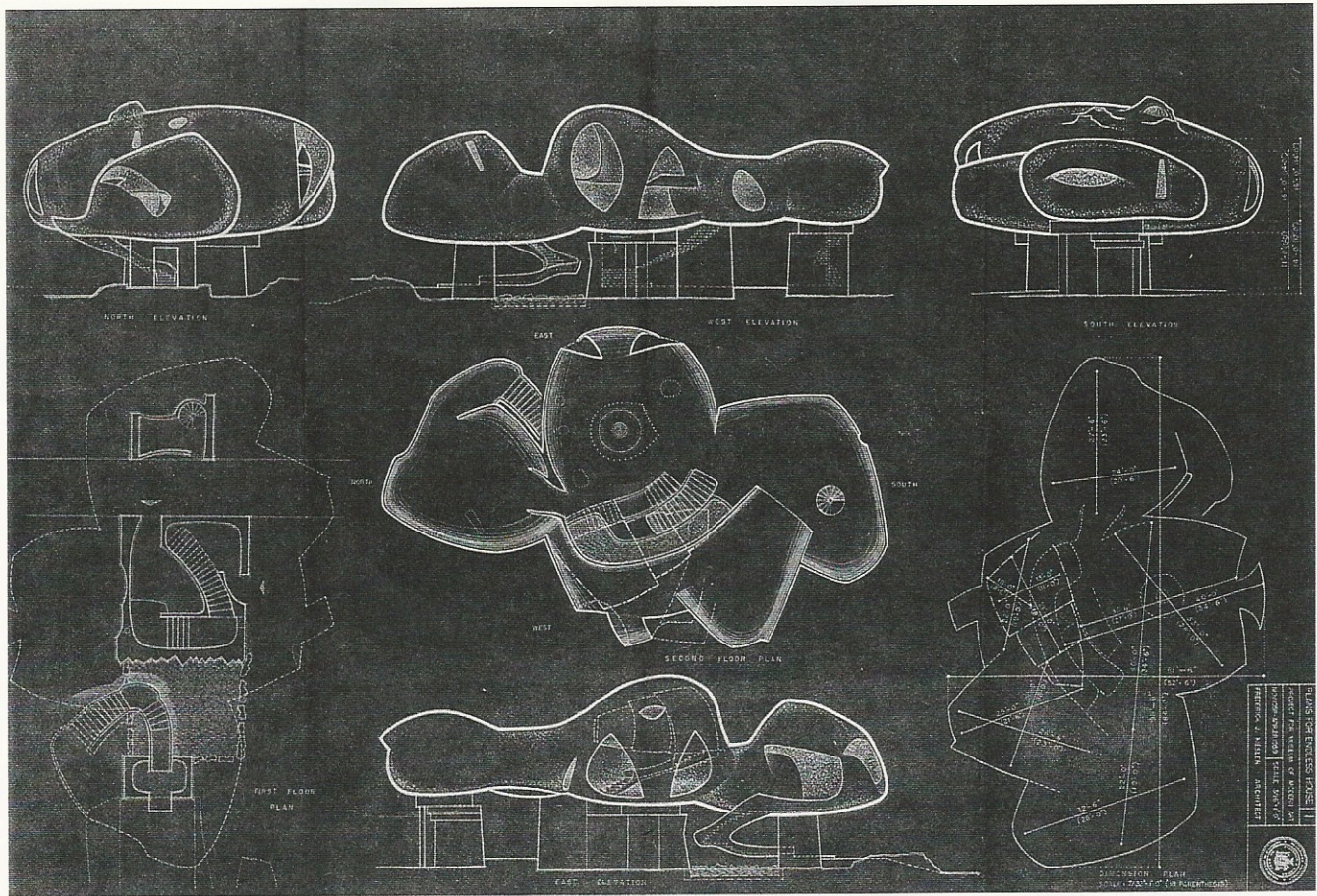
face actually touch the floor. It rose up and down like a wave front to allow museum visitors to pass under it to view the other side. The diameter was to be large enough to allow intimate and distance viewing of the same artwork in perfect continuity. There would be underground storage, a first-level lobby, and shops.

Near the summit of the building were to be the administration offices and the crowning glory—a glass-enclosed conservatory for celebrations and special events. An external, glass-enclosed spiral staircase, connected at every third level by small bridges, would exit into an extensive Japanese garden at the base of the structure. The image of the entire complex would have been like the apparatus of some gigantic scientific or alchemical experiment. Before Kiesler could complete the details of his concept, Guggenheim left to consult with the rest of her family. The consensus was that the growing New York art market could support another major museum. They all loved Kiesler’s ideas, but there was the problem of his public recognition, so it was decided to have another architect, of unchallenged reputation both nationally and internationally, come on board. That architect was Frank Lloyd Wright.

“At first,” Kiesler told me, “I was elated to be working with Wright, but then came the later situation.” As I got to know Kiesler better in the year I worked in his sculpture studio, I realized that he was the type of artist who took great pride in demonstrating that his concepts were not only completely original to him, but historically prior to similar concepts by others, being immediately influential and touchstones to the future. In order to maintain this position, Kiesler on occasion indulged in the same historical hyperbole he accused others of promoting. A minor example of the latter is when he met Andy Warhol.

Kiesler had just seen some of the early Pop Art exhibits when I arrived in 1962. “The boys think they are doing something new,” he said dismissively, “but it’s just Dada again!” Because my antenna was always out, I called Warhol saying I would like to meet him and mentioning that I worked for Kiesler. Warhol had never met Kiesler and asked me to introduce them, which I did. Despite their meeting, Kiesler was still dubious of Warhol’s significance as an artist, but with his meteoric rise in the art world, Kiesler’s attitude changed abruptly. There is a photograph that documents one of their meetings in Warhol’s “Factory.” It shows Kiesler examining the pendant of a necklace being worn by a Warhol “superstar.” Standing next to her is Warhol rubbing his hands together like a satisfied impresario. The correct date of the photograph is 1964, noted in an article on Kiesler published in 1969 for *Zodiac 19*, a review of contemporary architecture. By the time this photograph enters Kiesler’s personal archives the date has been changed to an earlier time. When the photograph appears again in the catalog for Kiesler’s retrospective at The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1989, its caption reads “Kiesler with ‘superstar’ and Andy Warhol, 1950s.” At first I thought it was a typographical error, but in the chronology of Kiesler’s life it claims he first met Warhol in Amagansett, Long Island, in 1960.

Other little discrepancies about his life and career became known to me. In one catalog, his birth was recorded as September 2, 1896, in Vienna. Another claimed 1892, and yet other put his birthplace in Cernauti, Romania, 400 miles east of Vienna, on December 9, 1890. But these minor discrepancies did not unsettle me; in the end it’s what you do in life, not when or where you are born, that matters. And on the day



that I first met Kiesler, I felt I was in the presence of the most brilliant artistic mind that I had ever experienced. I believed his story about Frank Lloyd Wright, and even his further claim that the pilotis made famous by Le Corbusier was an idea lifted from the "City in Space" project.

In terms of the "business" with Wright and origin of the spiral motif of the Guggenheim Museum, architectural historians including Jordi and William J.R. Curtis hearken back to Wright's use of the circle around 1910, claiming that "the spiral emerges, of course, from the circle." This is a dubious thesis. A circle is by nature static and a spiral dynamic. A circle can be envisioned completely in the mind. A spiral must be experienced like a dance. It implies completed motion and living continuity. Wright's earliest use of the spiral was for a project for The Gordon Strong Automobile Objective and Planetarium at Sugar Loaf Mountain, Maryland in 1925 (never realized). It is a hemisphere dome surrounded by two interlocking automobile ramps. Arthur Drexler, who published the drawings in the catalogue accompanying a 1962 Museum of Modern Art exhibition of Wright's drawings, suggests that "the Guggenheim is the Sugar Loaf project turned inside out and of course upside down."

But earlier that same year in Paris while installing the "City in Space" exhibit, Kiesler worked on spiral designs such as a "Plan for Place de la Concorde" and a new form of a department store, the aforementioned "Tensionist" Skyscraper, which became the motif for his Guggenheim proposal. These existed as architectural prints mounted on board, little more than concept sketches, but cleanly drawn and of sufficiently large scale to be noticed in Kiesler's presentation at The Exposition.

It is known that Wright attended the opening of the 1925 Exposition, as he was never a person to let someone else's grass grow under his

feet. The upshot of all this was that eighteen years later Kiesler joined a private "think tank" set up by the Guggenheims with Wright just waiting to receive him. Then, encouraged by Peggy Guggenheim, Kiesler told all. When he was done, they said his proposal was completely unfeasible. "You cannot attach your building structurally or functionally to others. We want a completely separate structure. Besides," they added, "we don't know what you are doing." But Wright did.

Kiesler was kicked for a field goal without any further contact except for an invitation to the inaugural reception in 1959. On the day that I met him I told him that when I first saw the Guggenheim from the outside, it reminded me of an amusement park ride or a late entry into the 1939 New York World's Fair. My parents had visited the fair and years later showed me snapshots of structures like the Trylon and the Perisphere, symbols of the fair. From a distance or in airbrushed renderings the forms appeared to be perfect geometric elements, but up close the surfaces resembled bubbling, peeling paint. Kiesler said that in its attempt at a completely smooth surface the Guggenheim failed because of the impossibility of trying to make reinforced concrete do the aesthetic work of polished cardboard. He explained that he had developed five different textures natural to concrete. Kiesler's revenge came at the opening reception when he overheard a conversation between two wealthy matrons. One, who apparently had a personal problem with regularity, lived in an adjacent building so situated that her bedroom window overlooked the museum. "Each day upon arising and looking out the window," she confided, "I am filled with an overwhelming desire to flush it."

My take on the interior was that the central core space was "dead—and deadly. The railing on the internal ramp is dangerous

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GOES

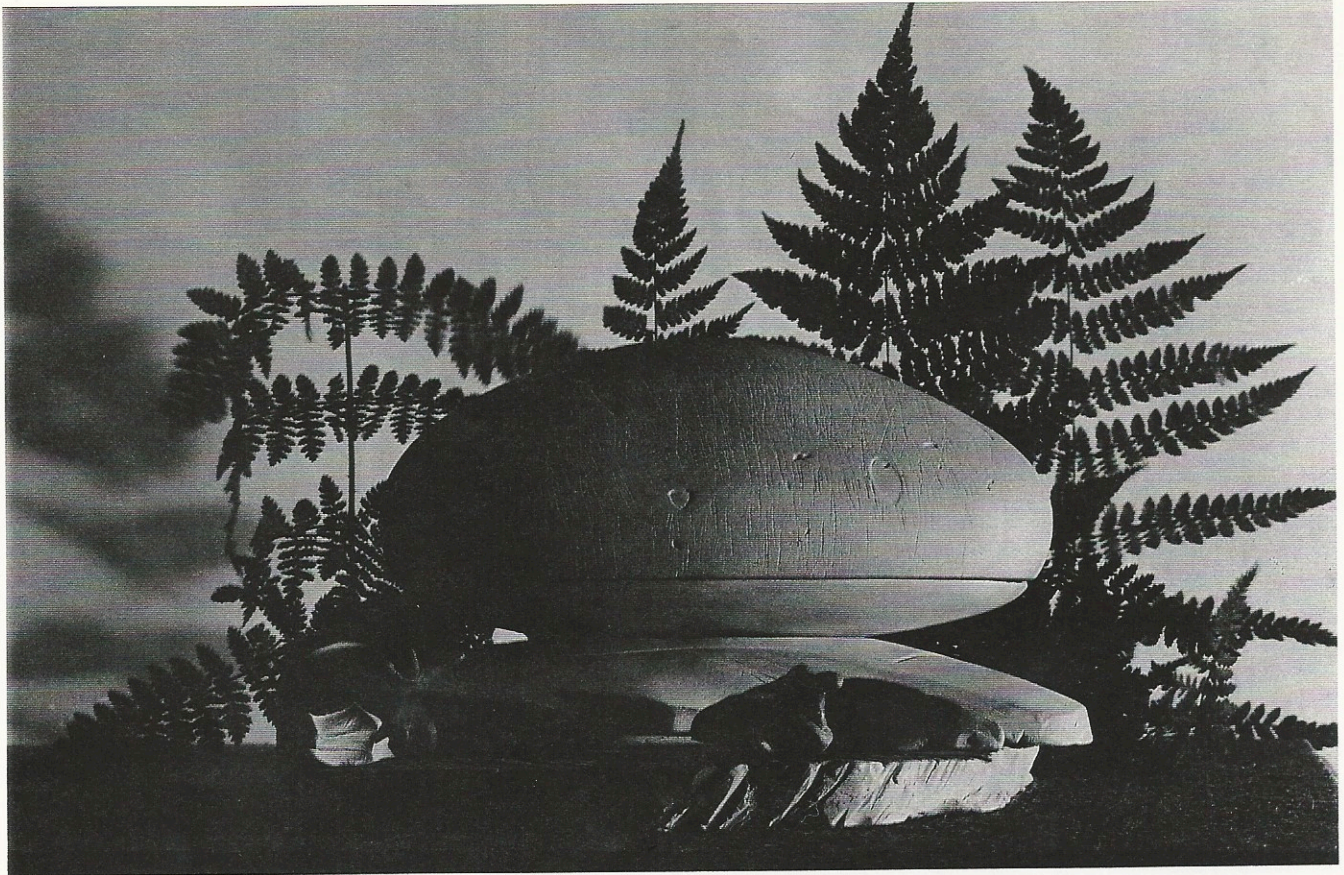
because if you back away from a painting to get a larger perspective on the work you might do a back flip on the rounded top edge right onto the bottom of the open pit. Simple looking across the core space to a work you have previously seen up close is not a viable substitute for the personal continuity of the visual capacities of your own eyes. Also the presentation area alongside the ramp is punctuated by wall-like structural partitions than make most exhibits resemble high-priced flea markets. "I could never figure out why the paintings are held off the walls on brackets until I saw your work on installations," I told him. "Wright did not take full advantage of the principle."

Kiesler lit up with joy and welcomed me as his newest apprentice. I was to report for work the following Tuesday evening at 7:30. His public studio was located in a huge loft on the northern corner of 12th Street and Broadway, just below Union Square Park, the same park where Warhol would later set up his "Factory" just to be near Kiesler. There were two other Kiesler studios. One was a private studio that only a few people, such as his wife, knew about. Then there was a "secret studio." Its whereabouts were discovered quite by accident by second wife Lillian Olinsey five years after Kiesler's death! Before leaving, I had to ask one more question. "Why did I have to write you 17 times before you replied? His answer surprised me. "That's my number." "What do you mean?" I queried. "It is a highly spiritual number and I live by it," he explained. "It's the number of immortality. It is called "The Star of the Magi" and expresses that the person it represents is superior in spirit to the trials and difficulties of his life and career. It also was the number of Francesco Borromini, the Baroque architect who was the spiritual heir of Michelangelo. In San Carlo Alle Quattro Fontane (Saint Carl of the Four Fountains) built in Rome, there are 17 perspective points used in the design of its tiny chapel so all its aspects appear perfectly natural to the continuous eye as you walk through it. In the furniture that I design for instance I have been able to use a single element in 17 ways. Without even telling people they seem to discover the 17 functions for themselves." I was to learn that Kiesler also thought of himself as a spiritual heir to Michelangelo. He patterned his life that way. When he reached 60 years of age, for instance, he began to write poetry as Michelangelo did. He would use Michelangelo's titles for the names of his artworks, such as "The Last Judgment," which came to have great significance for me, as it turned out.

Then Kiesler added to my amazement by informing me that 17 was my number as well. "What do you mean?" I pressed. "All the letters you sent were from the same address, 17 Taylor Road in Belmont, Massachusetts, is that not correct? "Yes," I replied tentatively. "How long have you lived there?" "Since I was five years old." "In other words, your whole life?" "Yes." I was starting to feel like the Sorcerer's Apprentice. I tried to get into my New York routine as quickly as possible. In the evening I would be in Kiesler's studio. The daytime meant looking for my own studio or at least a place to work and live. And a job was necessary to keep the whole thing going. Living at the Y I'd receive regular visits from staff members whose sole aim seemed to be to discover if and when I was planning to commit suicide. I had to get out.

About that time I started cold-calling artists that I'd heard about for advice. Kiesler, for some reason, told me to stay put at the Y. When I called Warhol he was happy to help me because he wanted to get to know Kiesler, whom he considered to be part of Manhattan's permanent avant-garde. In fact he asked me if I would like to live for a while in his studio in exchange for work. I agreed, not really knowing what I was getting into. Warhol's first large studio was a reconverted fire station on Lexington Avenue above 115th Street. I was expecting to be employed as a carpenter, a plumber, or even one of his painting assistants. But instead my task was to watch television. Since I was the "new guy" in the Factory I got the middle-of-the-night slot watching "test patterns." I began painting them to show Andy what went on; they were my first mandala-like images.

For survival work I tried applying to architectural firms. I had no luck until I tried Emery Roth & Sons Architects, then located on Second Avenue at 52nd Street. They were working on Minoru Yamasaki's building, the twin-towered World Trade Center, to be erected on Cortlandt Street. For some reason I was placed in the design group, probably because it was the least important part of the firm. As far as design fulfillment goes, I think Yamasaki, the architect-of-record, felt his job was over at the delivery of an exterior model and a developed program. His attitude was "the boys can fill it up," meaning design the interior. I was assigned floors 15 through 45 in Tower Two. It's hard to know when you are actually part of history or not. While working on my task I thought the whole



building was junk, and I still do. But since the Trade Center went up in 1974, it has become a New York landmark like the Empire State Building. My grandfather worked on the original interior of the Chrysler Building in 1928 and probably felt the same way that I did. Eventually I was fired from Emery Roth because of my casual suggestion that access bridges between the towers at every fifth level would create more horizontal rentable area. It seems Yamasaki was monitoring the progress of the design with more diligence than I thought.

In Kiesler's studio at first I just helped by moving objects around while he composed parts of uncompleted sculptures. When he discovered that I had a strong sense of massing and good spatial ideas, he had me try out various esquisses (quick sketches) and rough maquettes. He would examine my work and decide which ideas should be discarded, saved, or developed. He often made notes and his own sketches to show me the way to the next step, offering suggestions like, "Don't make that wood section look finished. Avoid carving. 'I have never carved wood. I want to see some chopping of the surface, incising, splitting, hewing, and tearing.'" He once demonstrated how to make ordinary machined lumber look like raw wood taken directly from the tree. After his comments to me and his other assistants, Kiesler would return to the visitors he had arrived with, people of stature in the art world such as Alfred Barr, Thomas Messer, Maurice Tuchman, Leo Castelli, or Lucy Lippard, not to mention the bevy of wealthy, beautiful women who were the human décor in his life.

Eventually Warhol was able to siphon off some of these women for his own artistic harem. There were a certain number of regulars. These were usually artists of varying degrees of talents who fre-

quented Kiesler's studio out of true friendship, but mostly to kiss ass and look for opportunities which were in abundance. Two of my favorites were the painter Salvatore Scarpitta and the sculptor John Chamberlain. They both appreciated what Kiesler was doing, and they each had their own mature styles so there were no hidden agendas or competitions between them. Scarpitta was a warm, open man who spoke to everyone in the studio and would say something like "That's knocking on the door" to Kiesler upon seeing some new work. The opposite approach was preferred by Chamberlain, a bear of a man who would sometimes come in roaring drunk and try to drag Kiesler away from his work to a local bar. When people asked him why he did the sculpture he did, he'd bellow, "Because there are no rules!"

If Kiesler refused to leave with him, Chamberlain would begin to sulk, then he would return to his own studio to beat yet another automobile into submission. Someone I did not like (although I kept my feelings to myself) was Karlheinz Stockhausen, the avant-garde composer. In my opinion he was there only to rip-off Kiesler's ideas about the egg shaped "Endless Theatre." Years later, I discovered that Stockhausen had utilized Kiesler's theatre design, claiming it was his, to stage "Mystery," a synthetic performance piece by the Russian symbolist composer Aleksandr Scriabin (1872-1915). "Mystery" was conceived of as a synthesis of all the arts, a religious ritual combining poetry, drama, dance, music, colored lights, even fragrances. It was conceived to be held in a hemispherical temple in Pondicherry, India, that contained an artificial lake and island. That way, because of the water's reflection, the congregation would seem to be enclosed in a perfect sphere.

In my own conversations with Kiesler I was able to tap his Gothic and surreal side with talk of mysticism and the occult. When I first saw his plans for "The Shrine of the Book" (the Dead Sea Scrolls Museum of Jerusalem), I remarked that the dome resembled the flying saucer from the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. He became upset and insisted the motif was derived from an amphora jar common in the desert where the scrolls were found. "But," I countered, "where are the two handles near the neck, and you cannot drive those jars that far into the sand." It was the only time we ever argued and it led, I believe, to what occurred on the last day I saw him.

It was a day early in December of the year I worked for him—quite routine. Leaving the office of Emery Roth & Sons promptly at five, I took the uptown subway to 15 West 85th Street—my "studio." It was a single furnished room measuring 9x5x8 inches. I'd convinced my landlady to remove the furniture. It had one light bulb on a sidewall. I augmented the light level with votive candles everywhere. My evening meal was cooked on a sterno stove balanced on my windowsill. I ate quickly so I would have more time to draw before leaving at seven to go to Kiesler's. I drew while listening to a crystal set with headphones. When I returned from Kiesler's studio I would continue drawing while listening to Jean Shepherd, the American humorist, on station WOR, which was followed by Long John Nebel who interviewed people all night, like Orfeo Angelucci who wrote *The Secret of the Saucers*. It was the early '60s and I had a room in Manhattan for \$24 a month!

That particular December eve it was nearing 7 PM. I took the subway to Union Square and walked swiftly down Broadway to the corner of 12th Street, climbed the three flights of stairs and knocked on the studio door. Kiesler himself answered, and I was ushered in as usual. Then, without any seeming context, he said, "You are a dreamer." No explanation was given—he segued right into his orders for the evening. To this day, I cannot decide if he was paying me a compliment or delivering his most perceptive insult of my character.

By this time at the studio I had become a "finisher," one of a trusted inner core of assistants who did all the final work on his sculptures before they left for exhibition. A major show was planned for the following year (1963) at the Guggenheim, and I had become Kiesler's most trusted "finisher." He handed me a soft rag and led me to what would be the masterpiece of the exhibition, "The Last Judgment." It had arrived last week from the foundry in Udine, Italy. The parts included shapes made of bronze, aluminum, pewter, Lucite, gold leaf, and stainless steel. Casting the bronze bone-like elements alone had cost over \$30,000. The previous day it'd had a mock assembly, but was disassembled so I could reach all the pieces with a strong patina. My job was to shine the patina so that no matter where the spectator stood on the museum's winding ramp to view the the sculpture they would admire its luster.

First off I was supposed to bring the patina on the main element to the highest shine and then grade all the other patinas down from that. Taking the rag from his hand and seating myself on a stool in front of Element One I began to rub. Meanwhile Kiesler moved on to the other parts of the studio to help others work on other sculptures. I rubbed and I rubbed, and the patina on this bronze "bone" came alive under my deft fingers. I was amazed at what was happening. I'd seen patinas before

but I'd never drawn one out. I rubbed harder, and harder.

Then it happened. Tiny scratches began to appear. I rubbed even harder. They grew deeper. I began to sweat and squirm on my stool, not knowing what to do but continue rubbing. The beautiful patina was being destroyed. Kiesler, who was way down at the other end of the studio and always had his antennae out for trouble, spotted me. He came running as fast as his little legs could carry him. As he neared me he realized what had happened. Quite by instinct, I'm sure, he picked up a nearby wooden mallet. Raising it in an attempt to strike my head he shouted in his thick accent, "This is unforgivable!" I dodged the fatal blow by inches and headed for the door. I ran down the stairs. I could hear him following me but I didn't look back. On the street I made for the Union Square subway. I rode to 86th Street and ran the block to my room to grab my suitcase. I was back on the street in two minutes flat, hailed a cab and went directly to La Guardia Airport. I figured it was time to leave New York. I never saw or heard from Kiesler again. Over the years I've often wondered what was the upshot of that evening. After all, Kiesler had handed me the rag. Was I really at fault? And would he really have killed me if I had not escaped?

Recently I was in New York City and visited the Guggenheim. There was an exhibit devoted to Frank Gehry's proposal for a new branch of the museum to be built overlooking the East River near Wall Street in lower Manhattan's financial district, spanning the length of several piers. When I compare Gehry's proposal for the Guggenheim to Kiesler's design for the "Endless House," to me it appears as close to the latter's style as anyone has come. Since Gehry wrote the introduction to the current Kiesler installation at Los Angeles's MAK Center at the Schindler House, perhaps he is positioning himself, in terms of imagery, to make the final transition to a monstrous version of the Endless House. While this is a compliment to his memory, I'm quite sure it was not Kiesler's intention that a museum on the scale of the new Guggenheim consist of a graphically enlarged version of what was designed to be a domestic solution. But I am also sure, as the voice tells Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* that "If you build it, they will come."

Thirty-eight years later the questions about Kiesler that I pose to myself are more universal. His vision is rapidly coming into its own and many are the claimants coming forward with decodings of that vision. In the end, regardless of who is right, Philip Johnson's dictum about Kiesler must be amended. Though Kiesler died in 1965, through his new disciples, he will now become the greatest "built" architect of the 21st century.

Frederick J. Kiesler: *Endless Space continues through February 25 at the MAK Center at the Schindler House, 835 North Kings Road, West Hollywood, CA. Information (323) 651-1510 or www.makcenter.com.*

Masters of Architecture: A Symposium on Frederick J. Kiesler will be offered February 22 at 6:30 p.m. in the Bing Theater at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles. Panelists include Lebbeus Woods, founder of the Research Institute for Experimental Architecture, historian Anthony Vidler, and architect Greg Lynn. Tickets required. Information (323) 857-6010.